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Jennifer Lynn Shaffer
University of Northern Iowa

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Readers' workshop: Giving students time, choice, and flexibility in the classroom

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Abstract

This literature review examines Readers' Workshop and the impact it has on a primary classroom. The purpose of this review is to define Readers' Workshop, discuss how it is structured, and learn the teacher's role during Readers' Workshop. Benefits and challenges of Readers' Workshop are also presented in this review. Research for this review has been gathered from professional articles and books about literacy and Readers' Workshop. Choice, time and flexibility have been found as key elements in an effective Readers' Workshop. The benefits of Readers' Workshop in a primary classroom outweigh the challenges of implementing such a strategy.

READERS' WORKSHOP: GIVING STUDENTS TIME, CHOICE, AND
FLEXIBILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

A Graduate Literature Review
Submitted to the
Division of Literacy Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education

by
Jennifer Lynn Shaffer
University of Northern Iowa

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APPROVAL PAGE

This study by: Jennifer Lynn Shaffer

Entitled: Readers' Workshop: Giving Students Time, Choice, and Flexibility in the
Classroom

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Date

Dr. William P. Callahan, Associate Dean & Professor

Date

Dr. Timothy G. Weih, First Reader/Advisor

Date

Dr. Penny L. Beed, Second Reader

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Abstract

This literature review examines Readers' Workshop and the impact it has on a primary classroom. The purpose of this review is to define Readers' Workshop, discuss how it is structured, and learn the teacher's role during Readers' Workshop. Benefits and challenges of Readers' Workshop are also presented in this review. Research for this review has been gathered from professional articles and books about literacy and Readers' Workshop. Choice, time and flexibility have been found as key elements in an effective Readers' Workshop. The benefits of Readers' Workshop in a primary classroom outweigh the challenges of implementing such a strategy.

Introduction

Reading is an essential skill which a child uses throughout his or her entire life. The strategies and methods for literacy instruction are varied and widespread (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Controversy surrounds these numerous methods – which is better? Which method(s) will produce the most successful readers? Language such as *basal-oriented*, *skill-based or phonics instruction*, *balanced literacy*, and *guided reading* is used to paint a picture of the various methods and tools that exist to teach literacy (Rasinski & Padak, 2004).

Every teacher knows all learners have different needs; therefore, there will never be one set method that works for every child. Many researchers, however, agree that components such as choice, authenticity, and time, when implemented naturally into literacy instruction, encourage and enable readers to flourish (Guthrie, 1996; Rasinski & Padak, 2004; Miller, 2002). In an article from *The Reading Teacher*, Guthrie (1996) supports the component of choice by stating, “when teachers support autonomy by encouraging free expression of opinions, providing choice for learning tasks, and inviting students to participate in decision making, students increase their commitment to learning” (p. 438)

In their book, *Effective Reading Strategies: Teaching Children Who Find Reading Difficult*, Rasinski and Padak (2004) stress the importance of authenticity in literacy instruction. They believe regardless of how literacy instruction is delivered, it will not connect to students if it is not meaningful to students. At the beginning of their book, they state:

We believe that children are most likely to engage in reading

when they perceive it as meaningful, instrumental, and/or enjoyable.

When students see that reading is useful, playful, or interesting, they are more likely to pull out books, newspapers, or other written materials and read with purpose and passion. (p. 5)

Research has also suggested fluency and the level at which children enjoy reading are related to engagement with materials that are interesting to them for extended periods of time (Smith, 1985). In the *Becoming a Nation of Readers* report, some research studies suggested that, in typical primary grade classrooms, students spend only 7-8 minutes of their school day reading on their own; in typical intermediate grade classrooms, children read independently for only about 15 minutes throughout the school day (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; as reported by Reutzel & Cooter, 1991).

Keeping in mind the importance of factors such as choice, time, and authenticity, a teacher might ask: "how is all of that possible during literacy instruction?" According to Frank Serafini (2001), Readers' Workshop is an approach to teaching literacy that is both centered around the children and literature-based. He also describes it as a malleable structure that changes constantly in order to meet the needs of both teachers and students in the classroom community (Serafini, 2001). I have become interested in learning more about students as independent readers; therefore, I have decided to review literature about Readers' Workshop for this paper.

Rationale

I have chosen to review literature about Readers' Workshop because I have been looking for ways to further differentiate reading instruction in my first and second grade classroom. Currently in my multiage classroom, I conduct small guided reading groups

and literacy centers. This has been a meaningful and successful method for me over the past four years, but I have always thought my classroom instruction lacks student choice, flexibility, and extended time for independent reading. Also, I have always wanted to give students the opportunity to apply the strategies and skills they have learned in their guided reading groups as they read independently for pleasure. While this is a great goal for me, I have never found a way to provide students with that meaningful chunk of time in which they have choice.

Another daily practice that I have always planned into my classroom routine is Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Typically, I have two short periods where students read independently - first thing in the morning, and right after lunch. To me, SSR is a valuable time because it gives students a chance to read self-selected materials, and it is an independent, relaxing activity in the classroom. In the past year or two, however, I have developed two main concerns with SSR: (a) Some students select materials that are either way too easy or way too difficult for them, and (b) some students do not spend their time wisely. Their actions demonstrate these students are clearly bored and not even reading. Instead of being actively engaged in reading, they are quickly flipping through pages and/or resting their heads or spacing off the entire time.

Last year, during one of my literacy education classes, I learned a little bit about Readers' Workshop from Professor Beed, and it immediately caught my interest. The characteristics presented that sparked the most interest for me were the elements of time, choice, and flexibility. As I listened to Dr. Beed's presentation, I imagined Readers' Workshop taking place in my classroom. I imagined students actively engaged in reading that was interesting to them, practicing literacy strategies they learned in the classroom. I

pictured a more purposeful and meaningful way to motivate students and foster their reading and writing development. I decided, then, to become more knowledgeable about Readers' Workshop so I could decide if it was something I wanted to implement into my classroom to teach literacy more effectively.

Purpose

Reading is essential for every child in today's society. I am conducting this literature analysis because I am interested in finding out what impact Readers' Workshop has on primary grade students. I would like to know (a) what Readers' Workshop is and how it is structured, (b) what teacher roles are during Readers' Workshop, and (c) what benefits and challenges are found within Readers' Workshop. Learning all the components of Readers' Workshop will help me determine if it is a method of literacy instruction I would attempt in my classroom someday.

Importance

Reading is a lifelong skill for every person and it is important to me that my students are enjoying what they read. A large number of students are discouraged or frustrated with reading because they lack confidence or have not found topics they are passionate about. I believe it is important for students to see themselves as good readers and to have a variety of topics they are interested in reading more about. This research is also important to me for personal and professional reasons. First of all, I have been using a practice in my classroom with which I am currently not satisfied—SSR. I know it is important for students to have time to independently read self-selected materials, but this method is not working for all students in my classroom. As a professional, I have

discussed with my fellow staff members the importance of differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all learners in my classroom (Carolan & Guinn, 2007).

Research Questions

When I first heard about Readers' Workshop, it greatly appealed to me. What I wanted to do next was determine if Readers' Workshop is something that will impact my first and second grade classroom. In order to learn the most about Readers' Workshop and to make this literature review most effective, I need to be able to define Readers' Workshop and learn about all its components. As a teacher, I also need to know what my role would be in a Readers' Workshop setting. Knowing what the benefits and challenges of Readers' Workshop are will also be useful to me as a teacher and as a learner.

The study was guided by one primary question: What impact does Readers' Workshop have on a primary grade classroom? This question was further defined by secondary questions:

1. What are past and present methods of teaching reading?
2. What is Readers' Workshop?
3. How is Readers' Workshop structured?
4. What are the roles of the teacher during Readers' Workshop?
5. What are the benefits and challenges of Readers' Workshop?

Terminology

Several key terms related to literacy and Readers' Workshop will be presented throughout this literature review. Knowing this vocabulary is essential to having a clear understanding of Readers' Workshop. According to Tim Rasinski and Nancy Padak

(2004), *Readers' Workshop* is a daily routine that focuses on individual needs of students while keeping a cooperative, collaborative classroom environment. This type of environment involves a variety of teaching methods, including *skill-based* or *phonics* instruction. Skill-based instruction involves direct teaching and practice of skills necessary for reading, including phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (Armbruster & Osborn, 2001). Skills-based instruction is merely part of a balanced literacy approach.

Balanced literacy is a key term which encompasses many of the strategies found in the Readers' Workshop format. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) support the idea that balanced literacy means children develop reading and writing abilities in various environments through a variety of instructional methods, depending on the students and their needs. Read aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and independent reading and writing are all activities that could be included in a balanced literacy environment (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The idea of using each learner's needs to drive instruction is *differentiation* (Carolan & Guinn, 2007). Differentiating instruction is an important aspect of the Readers' Workshop.

One of the many activities included in a classroom that is supportive of balanced literacy is *Sustained Silent Reading*. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), is defined by Stephen Krashen (2006) as "free voluntary reading, or reading because you want to" (p. 43). Krashen states this is a kind of natural reading, or how people read as they mature. During SSR, students choose their own reading materials. This reading is not accompanied by homework or projects; it is merely done for pleasure (Krashen, 2006).

Two other reading activities that may be present in a balanced literacy classroom are *read aloud* and *shared reading*. According to Combs (2002), read aloud is a strategy in which teachers can demonstrate or model important strategies for reading. Teachers can use books they read aloud to encourage children to interact with text and focus on their thinking before, during, and after reading (Combs, 2002). Eventually, as students are more and more involved in read aloud, they begin to make the strategies modeled to them more automatic. Children can interact with texts in a similar way through another group activity called shared reading. Combs (2002) states that, through the use of big books and materials such as songs, poems, and chants, teachers can do the following during shared reading: (a) Instill an interest in reading, (b) demonstrate behaviors of good readers, (c) give students exposure and interaction with print, (d) encourage participation, and (e) develop skills such as fluency and decoding.

In addition to whole group activities, teachers can support children's reading development in small groups. *Guided Reading* is one such setting, in which the teacher works with students who have similar reading needs. The materials are chosen by the teacher, and he or she scaffolds students' reading along the way (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). In Guided Reading, the teacher "becomes a bridge between the child and a particular text" (Combs, 2002, p. 144). Through Guided Reading, teachers get to know their readers and learn how to guide them toward independence with reading (Combs, 2002).

The terms *Readers' Workshop*, *skill-based or phonics instruction*, *balanced literacy*, *differentiation*, *Sustained Silent Reading*, *read aloud*, *shared reading*, and *guided reading* will all be useful in understanding what the literature says about Readers'

Workshop, its structure, teacher roles, and its benefits and challenges. These definitions will help make the language in this review more clear to the reader. The next section of this literature review will discuss the methods of locating and choosing appropriate sources.

Methods

In order to become more knowledgeable about Readers' Workshop, its characteristics, its strengths and limitations, and whether it would be worthwhile to implement into my classroom, I reviewed numerous sources, including journal articles and books about the topics of reading instruction, and specifically the workshop approach to teaching literacy. The first topic addressed in this chapter will be the methods for locating all sources for this literature review. Following that, the methods for actually selecting resources relevant to Readers' Workshop will be discussed. Finally, I will share the procedures used to read and analyze all the sources used for this literature review.

Methods to Locate Sources

I began my search for sources by returning to the point at which my interest in the topic was first sparked: Dr. Penny Beed's presentation to us during a literacy education course. I first reviewed Dr. Beed's handouts to find important key concepts about Readers' Workshop that I knew I would want to search for. These concepts included the terms *Readers' Workshop*, referring to the method and format of instruction; *time*, meaning extended periods of time for students to be engaged with literature; *choice*, referring to a teacher allowing students to choose their reading materials and response activities; *structure*, meaning how the classroom is organized and how the workshop operates; *response*, or the students' ways of reacting to literature; and *community*, meaning the students in the classroom working together cooperatively, and the teacher fostering a comfortable, engaging learning environment. I then looked through her references and circled some of the book titles and articles I thought I would be interested

in reading. Going through this initial process provided me with a good springboard for researching the Readers' Workshop approach to literacy instruction.

After perusing my initial notes, I turned to online search engines to see what journal articles I could find on the topic of Readers' Workshop. I used both ERIC and Wilson Web to locate relevant articles, searching with terms such as *reading workshop*, *SSR and literacy instruction*. I found a great variety of articles on reading instruction, the whole language approach, and both reading and writing workshops in the classroom. I was able to access some of the information immediately with full-text articles; with other journals, I utilized the Rod Library online and put in requests for several of the articles I had found through my searches. In addition, I referred to the reference pages of the articles I had found in order to locate further articles.

Books were the other major source I used to increase my understanding of literacy instruction and the Readers' Workshop approach. One day at work, when I was sharing my research topic and search progress with my principal, she recommended a great book, *Reading With Meaning*, by Debbie Miller (2002). She told me that book was all about using the Readers' Workshop format to teach reading comprehension in a first grade classroom. She lent me her copy of the book, and also recommended another book she knew about, *Mosaic of Thought*, by Keene and Zimmerman (1997). After skimming through these two books and noting topics and important research about Readers' Workshop, I was convinced this was a topic I was passionate about, and continued my search for more book titles online.

While locating more book titles, I accessed Rod Library and began my search there. Through the library I was able to check out a few more books on my topic. I spent

a few weeks reading through them, marking sections and chapters that would be most useful in this literature review. I also searched online at amazon.com using key terms *literacy instruction, Readers' Workshop, and primary classrooms*. An incredible amount of literature came up, and I slowly looked through some of the most relevant choices, selected a few of the most interesting and important titles to me, and ordered them online. Finally, while making a trip up to the University of Northern Iowa for one of my summer online courses, I stopped in the bookstore, browsed through the professional literature about reading instruction, and selected two more books for further reading: *New Essentials for Teaching Reading in PreK-2*, by Moore and Lyon (2005), and *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All*, by Fountas and Pinnell (1996).

Methods to Select Sources

In my search for sources, I found a variety of articles and books useful to researching Readers' Workshop. To determine whether or not to use these sources, I considered the following: (a) Whether the sources talked specifically about Readers' Workshop, (b) whether the sources included key concepts covered in Dr. Beed's presentation (time, choice, etc.), (c) whether the authors based their ideas and explanations on research, and (d) the age of students discussed in the research. While going through the sources, I selected materials that included all or most of these considerations. I found a majority of my sources to be useful and relevant; many of the terms and concepts, in fact, overlapped. There were a few articles in which the research presented was based on middle school, high school, and even college level students. I chose not to include these sources in my research because my interest was reviewing literature about primary students.

Procedures to Analyze Sources

While reading through the selected journal articles, I first skimmed the article to preview the research and ideas it contained. I then went back and thoroughly read the article, highlighting and/or circling important information and useful quotations regarding literacy instruction and Readers' Workshop. After reading the article, I recorded on sticky notes the main areas included in the article. I followed this procedure with each of the articles, labeling every one with a sticky note on the first page.

Once I completed the reading of the journal articles, I found the articles included information in the following categories: (a) Definition of Readers' Workshop, (b) characteristics of Readers' Workshop, (c) teacher roles, and (d) benefits and challenges of Readers' Workshop. Having these categories set up gave me a good idea of the components to include in the literature review.

While going through books, I used a similar procedure. With each title, I first began my reading by examining the table of contents to get an idea of the concepts covered by the author or authors. I then skimmed through chapters that appeared to include relevant information and information that would fit into the categories created with the journal articles. If the book was my own, I wrote and highlighted important parts throughout the book, and marked and labeled certain sections or chapters with sticky notes, so I would know where to find that information again. In the books borrowed from other people (such as my principal), I used only sticky notes rather than highlighting and writing in the books. In books borrowed from libraries, I marked the chapters and sections that were most relevant, and photocopied them so I could write, highlight and label each one with sticky notes the way I had labeled the journal articles.

The procedures discussed in this section helped me organize the research and literature into meaningful groups. These procedures also enabled me to identify key sections to include in the literature review, as well as concepts or ideas that would be helpful to answering the research questions in the literature review.

Results

The research reviewed in this literature analysis included information about different methods of literacy instruction. It was important to review this literature to gain understanding of the background behind literacy instruction and how it evolved to what it is today. The literature reviewed also included relevant information regarding the definition and structure of Readers' Workshop, as well as the roles of both teacher and students in the Readers' Workshop framework. Some of the literature discussed benefits of Readers' Workshop, and very few discussed challenges to implementing Readers' Workshop in a primary classroom.

What are Past and Present Methods of Teaching Reading?

Over the past several decades, how to teach reading has been a great debate, with one side advocating instruction that emphasizes skills and the other side supporting a more meaning-centered approach to instruction (Christie, Enz, & Vukelich, 2003). Skill instruction involved direct lessons on specific skills of reading, such as phonics, letter recognition, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Instruction that placed more emphasis on meaning, however, was very different. This type of instruction gave students various opportunities to interact with authentic literacy activities, integrated curriculum, and used skill instruction on an as-needed basis (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003).

The more recent trend in reading instruction is what researchers call balanced literacy instruction (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003). Christie and researchers believe the best way to teach children to read is “an approach that relies primarily on the components of a meaning-centered approach to reading instruction, but that also includes direct, systematic instruction on key reading skills” (p.192). This definition of the best

instruction matches the way Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1996) define the reading process in *Reading Strategies: Focus on Comprehension*: "Reading is a problem-solving, meaning-making process. As readers, we consider that meaning the author is making while, at the same time, we are building meaning for ourselves" (p.3). Bruneau (1997) concurs, stating:

Just as the food groups can be combined to form nutritious meals, literacy events can be combined to form an appropriate literacy curriculum. This balance is achieved when a thoughtful teacher, knowledgeable of both literacy strategies and individual children's development through continuous assessments and plans for a variety of literacy activities. (p.160)

Regardless of how teachers teach reading, research suggests that students' engagement with the text and with each other are key components for learning to read and enjoying it (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). According to Anne Sweet (1993), engaged readers possess the following qualities: (a) They use what they already know to understand new material, (b) they employ many different skills and strategies to learn information from the text, (c) they enjoy reading and choose to read for fun, and (d) they interact with other readers to further their understanding and literacy development (as cited in Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003). Keene and Zimmerman (1997), share four components in reading instruction that enable children to become truly engaged readers: time, ownership, response, and community. Readers' Workshop is one approach to reading instruction that allows for elements such as these to take place on a daily basis in the classroom (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997).

What is Readers' Workshop?

Readers' Workshop is a daily routine that is centered around students and supports the development of children individually, while maintaining a collaborative framework (Rasinski & Padak, 2003). Originally introduced by Atwell in 1987, Readers' Workshop exemplifies an "ideal balance between connected reading and skill instruction" (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003, p. 217). This approach to reading instruction allows students extended periods of time to practice their reading and writing skills (Bruneau, 1997). It provides teachers time to give direct instruction in small groups as needed, conference individually with readers, and conduct ongoing assessments to help inform their instruction. Readers' Workshop enables teachers to know their students, and to let them drive instruction in the classroom. (Calkins, 1986).

During Readers' Workshop, while the teacher is conferencing, assessing, or meeting with small groups, students in the classroom are engaged in activities such as self-selected reading and written response (Lause, 2004). The element of choice, according to research, is key to the Readers' Workshop. In her book, Nancy Atwell (1987) states, "If we want our students to grow to appreciate literature, we need to give them a say in decisions about literature they will read" (p.36). While it is important to provide choice, Reutzel and Cooter (1991), stress the importance of allowing students to make choices, while still maintaining a responsible, well-managed structure in the classroom. The next section will specifically describe the structure and components of the Readers' Workshop format.

How is Readers' Workshop Structured?

The basic structure of Readers' Workshop includes three major components: (a) A brief mini-lesson or shared reading, (b) a reading activity period, and (c) sharing time (Au, 1997; Bruneau, 1997). In the following subsections, I will elaborate on each of these components of the Readers' Workshop.

The mini-lesson. The introductory mini-lesson is often based on specific skills or strategies that students need in their reading or writing. According to Reutzel and Cooter (1991), other ideas for mini-lessons can be drawn from the following: (a) Teacher observations of student needs, (b) skills or concepts taken from basal reading curriculum, and (c) various pre-reading activities to help readers activate their prior knowledge before reading. A mini-lesson is typically anywhere from five to fifteen minutes long, and includes the entire group of students (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Researcher Lucy Calkins (2001), advises teachers to incorporate specific parts within each mini-lesson:

1. A link to previous or future activities to help students make connections.
2. An instructional phase in which teachers provide instruction of skills or strategies children need to become independent readers. A critical part of this portion of the lesson is modeling done by the teacher.
3. An engagement period where the teacher provides the children with time to practice the skills or strategies that were taught and modeled (as cited in Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003).

Mini-lesson topics can include different genre, literary elements (plot, character, setting), and reading strategies (word knowledge and meaning) (Combs, 1996). During a

good mini-lesson, the teacher often uses a think aloud strategy to model for students how to think and use the various strategies they are learning in the classroom. Mini-lessons “plant the seed” and further instruction can be done as needed with individuals or small groups of students (Combs, 1996). In the beginning of the school year, Readers' Workshop mini-lessons include community building activities, setting up classroom routines, and classroom expectations for Readers' Workshop. The teacher may also model various parts of Readers' Workshop such as selecting just right books, purposes for reading, responding to literature, and how to use the space of the classroom (Keene and Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001; Serafini, 2006).

Shared reading. A shared reading, or read-aloud, can also be used to begin Readers' Workshop, rather than a mini-lesson (Serafini, 2001). Sharing literature is a way to spark discussion in the classroom. It is also an authentic way for students to work on comprehension strategies such as predicting, making connections, and visualizing. Discussion and sharing ideas is also another way for students to reflect and react to what they read, rather than simply summarizing it (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Reflection and reaction, rather than summarizing, are recommended by proponents of Readers' Workshop. Serafini (2006) also believes that “how literature is discussed during the read-aloud provides the most concrete demonstration of the ways we want students to read and think on their own and in small groups” (p. 22). Beginning Readers' Workshop with the read-aloud routine helps “set the stage” for all the other pieces of the Readers' Workshop (Serafini, 2006, p.22).

The reading activity period. Sustained Silent Reading, or Self-Selected Reading (SSR), is the heart of Readers' Workshop (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). This is a period

where children are able to freely explore and respond to books of their choosing. SSR is also a time where students can have guided or individual practice with certain skills or strategies that were directly taught in a mini-lesson (Moore & Lyon, 2005). Students may also use this time to work on reading literature from their small reading groups, or “literacy clubs.” This may include rereading a book with a partner or individually, completing some type of literature log response or chart, making predictions about what they will read next, or working in literacy centers related to the books they are reading (Combs, 1996).

Choice is a central component in the Readers' Workshop (Combs, 1996). Since reading – individually or groups – is the heart of Readers' Workshop, it is important that students be engaged and motivated to read (Combs, 1996; Serafini, 2001). Providing choice and allowing students to self-select their own books and ways to respond to the literature gives students a sense of ownership and responsibility (Miller, 2002). Providing choice enables teachers to make a more meaningful and authentic learning environment for their students (Combs, 2002). In fact, Miller (2002) has found that “when children understand that they share in the responsibility for their learning, when they have a say in the books they read, and when what they are asked to do has meaning, they are able to read for long stretches at a time” (p. 43). Many researchers maintain that readers become better at reading by reading (Combs, 1996; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Serafini, 2001). By allowing choice, teachers are enabling student motivation to read.

Although students choose much of their reading and literacy activities, there is definitely some structure and accountability in Readers' Workshop (Serafini, 2001). In

his Readers' Workshop, during the sustained reading time, Frank Serafini begins the morning by meeting with five individual students each day. He calls these meetings reader's conferences. During a reader's conference, Serafini (2001) asks students to share with him what they have worked on the past week during Readers' Workshop. This allows him to hold his students accountable, but also enables him to identify successes and any problems that may come up with his readers.

During the remainder of his Readers' Workshop, Serafini (2001) can be found meeting with literacy clubs and strategy groups, which are small groups of students working on the same literature and reading strategies together. While he meets with his groups, other students in the classroom are engaged in literacy centers, such as listening to literature, creating artistic or written responses to literature, and reading self-selected materials individually or with a partner (Serafini, 2001).

Debbie Miller (2002) conducts her Readers' Workshop in a first grade classroom in a similar way. Before sending her students off to work on their individual reading, responding and projects, she wants students to know definitely what they will be doing and why. "I want them to be thinking, 'I get it. Now let me have at it!'" (Miller, 2002, p.33). Individual reading and responding allows students to practice and apply things they have learned from small groups or mini-lessons. In addition, reading logs or response journals enable students to participate in authentic, meaningful writing practice, and responses provide good assessment and student interest information for teachers (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003).

Sharing sessions. The final essential component of Readers' Workshop is sharing (Au, 1997; Combs, 1996; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Serafini, 2001). Whole-

group sharing at the end of Readers' Workshop encourages children to explain things they are working on, and allows the children to "teach" each other based on their individual activities during Readers' Workshop (Combs, 1996). In addition, whole group sharing time at the end fosters community building, collaboration and celebration in the classroom (Miller, 2002). According to Serafini (2001), sharing time also enables the classroom to discuss any concerns or ideas about reading or the structure itself of Readers' Workshop. Students can also brainstorm and add to class charts about reading strategies, elements of literature, and any other skills practiced during the workshop (Serafini, 2001). Atwell (1987) agrees, as she believes the social aspect of sharing literature in a classroom is key to children's reading development. When students are engaged in literary talk, they are doing what adults do as readers, which helps foster a sense of purpose and motivation with reading (Lause, 2004).

In his Readers' Workshop structure, Frank Serafini (2006) always begins the year by encouraging students to share more details about what they are thinking, rather than simply ask them why they like a certain book. This idea is supported by Chambers (1996) in his book, *Tell Me: Children, Reading, and Talk*. Chambers believes there are three specific responses children can learn to help them articulate their thinking during reading: (a) Enthusiasms, (b) puzzles, and (c) connections (Chambers, 1996). When students respond with enthusiasms, they are sharing what they liked about the book or story. In a puzzle response, the student shares something that is confusing, and connections consist of telling ways that the reader relates to the book personally and how the book relates to other books. Both Serafini (2006) and Chambers (1996) suggest that responses such as these enable children to provide more than simply, "I thought the book was good."

What are the Roles of the Teacher During Readers' Workshop?

The role of the teacher is the same during Readers' Workshop as it is in any effective literacy environment (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). According to these authors, teachers must do the following: (a) Believe all students will learn, (b) value every child and his or her qualities, (c) focus on student's strengths rather than weaknesses, and (d) provide choice to students and create meaningful learning experiences (p. 33).

In his book *Around the Reading Workshop in 180 Days: A Month-by-Month Guide to Effective Instruction*, Frank Serafini (2006) provides another look at the important roles a teacher has to running an effective Readers' Workshop. The first job he talks about is building a community of readers. In order to build community, Serafini believes that teachers must get to know their students – as learners and as children. Such activities as reading, listening to one another talk, playing games, and deciding how to arrange the classroom are some examples of what Serafini does to begin building community right away.

A second critical role of the teacher during Readers' Workshop is to organize the classroom space appropriately (Serafini, 2001; Serafini, 2006). This includes areas in the classroom designated for things such as supplies, group meetings, books, student work, teacher's materials, students' belongings, and reading areas. During Readers' Workshop, a teacher must also establish guidelines and procedures with the students. This involves discussing important aspects such as management expectations, as well as basic procedures and routines that students will participate in during Readers' Workshop.

Finally, a teacher serves as a model and guide for students during the Readers' Workshop (Rasinski & Padak, 2004; Serafini, 2006). It is important for the teacher to not

only provide encouragement and support for students, but to also be very excited about reading as well (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Many researchers have sought out characteristics of excellent literacy teachers, looking for common threads among them (e.g. Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In 2001, researchers Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, and Morrow found that effective teachers had exceptional classroom management strategies and an enthusiastic tone (as reported in Rasinski & Padak, 2004). These teachers provided direct skill instruction as well as appropriate support to scaffold student's learning – challenging, but not frustrating. In these classrooms, students were spending much time reading, and were provided access to good literature.

Rasinski and Padak (2004) reported on another study done by Taylor, Pearson, Clark and Walpole in 2000. In this study, the researchers found more effective teachers provided more of the following: (a) Small-group instruction, (b) scaffolding, (c) phonics with authentic practice, (d) higher-order thinking, (e) communication with families, (f) independence, and (g) engagement with literacy activities. These elements are also found in the practice of Debbie Miller (2002) in her book, *Reading With Meaning*. In this book of her own beliefs and teaching experiences, Miller summarized the role of the teacher in Readers' Workshop as modeling and explaining strategies, providing guided practice, independent practice, and allowing students to apply what they've learned in authentic experiences (Miller, 2002). Her advice for teachers to plan effectively is “think big picture” (p.12). Then, think of key components and how they will be taught.

The role of the teacher during Readers' Workshop can be summarized as organizer, facilitator and model of good practices. An effective teacher takes on these roles and incorporates important pieces such as classroom management, differentiation,

and effective planning. All of these pieces come together to create a positive learning community of readers and writers (Miller, 2002).

What are the Benefits and Challenges of Readers' Workshop?

A variety of benefits come along with the Readers' Workshop approach to literacy instruction (Au, 1997; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2003; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Serafini, 2001). Teachers such as Debbie Miller (2002) and Frank Serafini (2001) who reject traditional methods of teaching and employ the workshop method, see definite results. They see kids motivated to read and eager to share with each other. They also see students become independent and engaged learners (Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001). Keene and Zimmermann (1997) found that teachers they worked with were much happier with a workshop format. They found teacher responses were that "Children in our classrooms love books and spend time with them every day. As teachers, we are happier and more creative every day" (p. 19).

Teachers see positive results in other ways as well. In her classroom study of the effectiveness of Readers' Workshop, Au (1997) found that in areas such as feelings of ownership, voluntary reading, and word strategies, students demonstrated improvement after the implementation of Readers' Workshop. In the workshop, students are given more choice and more time to read. In Au's (1997) study, students' outlooks toward reading became more positive and students were more motivated to read independently and for pleasure. The larger amounts of reading led to improved use of word strategies (Au, 1997). This illustrates the belief that readers become better by reading.

The Readers' Workshop approach not only gives students extended time they need to read and practice reading skills, it provides them with many learning

opportunities (Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001; Serafini, 2006). In Readers' Workshop, students are receiving meaningful, whole group instruction through mini-lessons and shared readings (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003). They are learning and practicing the same decoding and comprehension skills they would learn in a more traditional curriculum, but are learning them within a more authentic, meaningful learning environment (Combs, 1996; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). The structure of Readers' Workshop gives students time to both read and respond to literature (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). It is an approach that fosters reflection, interpretation, and inquiry, "all of which support comprehension growth" (Rasinski & Padak, p. 177).

Another important benefit of using Readers' Workshop for literacy instruction is the flexibility embedded within it (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Although several suggested frameworks exist (Combs, 1996; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Serafini, 2001), the main ideas and structure of Readers' Workshop are similar. Reutzel & Cooter (1991) provide examples in article of different teachers conducting Readers' Workshop in varied ways. One teacher used the Readers' Workshop format to teach his basal curriculum, another teacher used a mix of basal literature and trade books, and a third teacher employed only literature-based instruction. All three teachers presented in the article voiced their support for Readers' Workshop. The third teacher, Mrs. Hans, stated, "And by the way, our test scores for the district tests and the CTBS were better than ever. I love the reading workshop!" (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991, p.554).

The benefits of flexibility are also demonstrated when teachers are able to use both reading and writing workshops together (Bruneau, 1997). It enables students to meaningfully connect reading and writing, and allows them more extended periods of

time for purposeful literacy work. The workshops are also able to be easily integrated into ongoing thematic units. For example, a skill from a mini-lesson may be modeled or used in reading from a content area such as science or math. When teachers are able to connect the curriculum, more meaningful learning can take place in the classroom (Bruneau, 1997).

Readers' Workshop is also beneficial because it provides teachers ample time to communicate and know their readers (Bruneau, 1997; Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001). Through individual conferences, small group and individual instruction, and discussions, teachers are able to see the progress and process of their readers, and hear any concerns the students have about reading (Serafini, 2001). In addition, because teachers have longer periods of time to work with students based on their needs, it can save them hours during the week, because they are not having to spend much time tweaking the curriculum for each individual student (Bruneau, 1997). A workshop format fits the instruction and assessment needs of both students and teachers.

While there are several researchers that support Readers' Workshop, there is very little research that does not support it. However, even though it is a strongly supported method of literacy instruction, there are a few challenges that come along with a Readers' Workshop approach (Au, 1997; Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). One of the biggest challenges of Readers' Workshop is that it is a routine which requires a lot of time and effort to implement successfully (Christie, Enz & Vukelich, 2003). It is a process that involves a lot of time, patience, and flexibility (Serafini, 2001). It requires teachers to be more prepared and thoughtful when planning reading instruction (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In order to effectively teach Readers' Workshop, Combs

(1996) argues that teachers must know what their students enjoy and what they need, be very familiar with a variety of children's literature, and be confident with their language arts and reading curriculum. Teachers must be aware of all of their students and their needs, and use those needs to drive instruction and groupings. They must be able to provide information on a wide variety of children's books, and be able to provide quality books in the classroom (Combs, 1996). An effective teacher also needs to keep organized, thoughtful records of each individual student (Serafini, 2001). All these things teachers must do to be adequately equipped to operate Readers' Workshop may seem overwhelming, especially if a teacher is used to opening a manual and teaching right from it (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Many teachers, however, agree that all the planning, preparing, observing, and hard work pay off in the classroom (Keene & Oliver, 1997; Miller, 2002; Reutzel & Cooter, 1991; Serafini, 2001).

Conclusions

The purpose of this review of literature was to learn about Readers' Workshop – what it is, how teachers operate it, and the benefits and challenges of this literacy instructional method. I was interested in researching Readers' Workshop because my classroom practice includes many components of effective literacy instruction, but I was looking for something a little deeper than SSR and guided reading alone. I wanted to find out if there was a better way to differentiate my instruction and meet the individual needs of all my learners. This section will discuss themes and trends found in the literature, limitations, and recommendations after compiling the research.

Themes and Trends

Some common threads or themes were found when reviewing the literature about Readers' Workshop. One theme is the importance of choice in literacy instruction. The research in this study supports giving learners choice and responsibility in the classroom. Many studies discussed in this literature review suggested students who have choice in their reading and instruction are more engaged readers (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997; Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001).

Another common theme found in the literature was that of time. Research from this analysis consistently stated that students who read more are better readers. Effective literacy educators provide their learners with plenty of time for reading and interacting with a variety of materials. In some of the relevant literature, time was listed as a key component of the Readers' Workshop framework (Combs, 1996; Miller, 2002; Serafini, 2001).

Flexibility and variety were other key components found in the literature about Readers' Workshop. Some of the key researchers such as Rasinski and Padak (2004), Serafini (2001), Miller (2002) and Keene and Zimmerman (1997) discussed the importance of a variety of meaningful literacy activities. The literature reviewed suggested that while teachers scaffold learners individually and in small groups, other students can be independent and responsible for engaging in activities that will enhance their reading development.

Limitations of This Literature Review

Overall, this was a thorough review of literature regarding Readers' Workshop at the primary grade levels. One limitation I encountered while conducting research was trying to limit the literature to only primary grade students. Almost all of the literature discussed Readers' Workshop among all elementary grade levels; much of it, in fact, emphasized Readers' Workshop as an effective strategy for intermediate and upper elementary students. There is little research that focuses on Readers' Workshop in a kindergarten, first or second grade classroom setting.

The second limitation of this review was experienced while finding information about the challenges of Readers' Workshop. Very few sources named challenges or obstacles to teachers when trying to implement Readers' Workshop in their classrooms. While the positive research regarding Readers' Workshop may sound encouraging, teachers must wonder if it is realistic to think few challenges will be encountered when developing a Readers' Workshop program for their classrooms. Like anything else, implementing Readers' Workshop will require change and time, two things educators do not find easily at all times.

A final limitation of this literature review was that there is very little quantitative research on Readers' Workshop. The research reviewed for this paper included only qualitative research. More quantitative research needs to be conducted in classrooms in order to gain more objective information about the effectiveness of Readers' Workshop as an instructional practice.

Recommendations

Based on the research presented in this literature review, I am interested in implementing Readers' Workshop into my classroom. As I think about my current reading instruction, I can identify pieces of Readers' Workshop that are already happening in my classroom, such as shared reading and meeting with book groups. Fortunately, my daily schedule allows for the extended period of time needed for an effective Readers' Workshop. I think if I were to implement Readers' Workshop, I would begin right away in the school year by modeling and teaching students a love for reading and how to choose books. I would follow the structure of group time, independent reading activities, and sharing time. My normal SSR would turn into a reading response time, in which students choose their own books and have opportunities to respond to the reading in a variety of ways. While students are working, I would meet with book groups as I do now, but also add in a block of time for individual conferences to better monitor my students' interests and progress. My role would become more of a facilitator and less of a structured "direction giver." This Readers' Workshop format will be an effective way to differentiate instruction, improve students' motivation levels, and enhance their reading and comprehension. It is a method of instruction that allows a teacher to know

her students, use their needs to drive instruction, and create an engaging environment where meaningful learning takes place (Miller, 2002).

As I have journeyed through my Literacy Education program the past three years, I have learned much about the importance of research-based best practices, and meeting the needs of all learners in the classroom, from the kids who consistently struggle to the high-achievers who always need a challenge. As a multiage teacher of both first and second grades together, I believe Readers' Workshop is a format that will better enable me to meet the diverse needs in my classroom. Many of the components of Readers' Workshop are already parts of my classroom; they are not, however, organized in a way that provide me with ample, extended time with individual students and groups for strategy instruction and literature discussions. My current classroom structure, although it contains literacy centers, book clubs, and SSR, is not organized so that children are given plenty of opportunity to be engaged with books, share their thinking, and have choice in their activities and books they read.

Based on the literature I have reviewed, I believe Readers' Workshop will help me integrate the positive practices I already employ and the practices that are currently lacking. With some time, effort and organization, I feel I will be able to create a classroom environment in which students are more motivated to read, more engaged in what they are reading, and in which children will continue to develop into good readers by reading books and responding in a variety of ways. Ultimately, I will hope to become one of those effective teachers about whom Serafini (2006) talks -- educators who teach each day for a variety of reasons in a variety of settings.

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